Bookchin’s Political Vision

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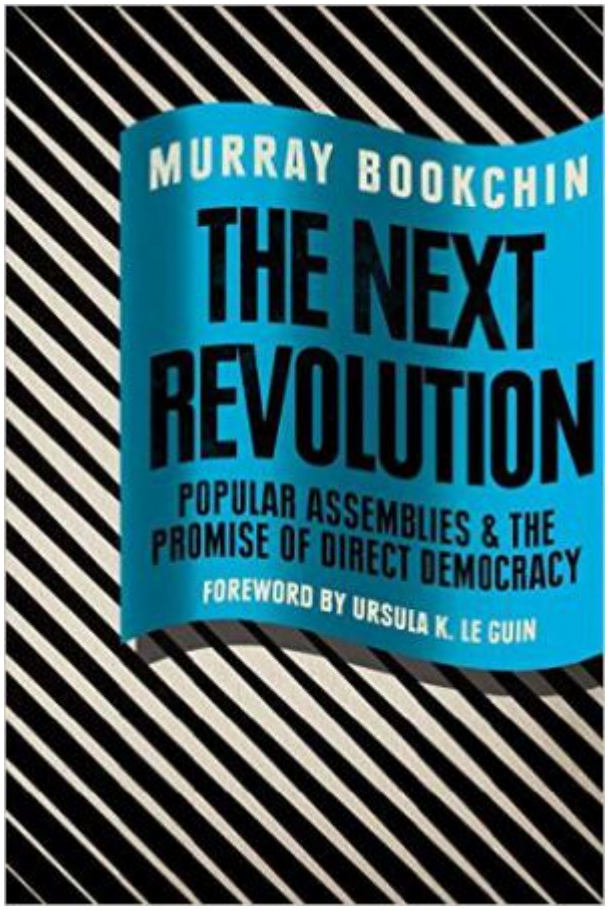
Murray Bookchin was one of the most prolific, original, and influential thinkers on the libertarian left. He was a major theoretician of anarchism and a passionate historian of cities and of popular uprisings and movements. As important, Bookchin was a groundbreaking writer on ecology, not just being one of the first to see the environment as an issue for the left, but indeed predating Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in warning about the environmental crisis. In the late 1980s and 1990s Bookchin waged vigorous polemics against individualist anarchists, primitivists, and deep ecologists, among others. Ultimately, he stopped calling himself an anarchist altogether, preferring “communalist” (an unfortunate term, given its association with religious conflict in India) or simply libertarian socialist.[1] Today, remarkably, he’s a hero to Kurdish revolutionaries.

In 1998, Bookchin contributed an essay to a *New Politics* symposium on *The Communist Manifesto* in which he noted that “The question of the institutions of political and social management by a class as a whole—and eventually by citizens in a classless society—has no easy resolution.” The current volume is a collection of Bookchin’s writings on this challenging question. The book consists of essays that Bookchin wrote between 1990 and 2002, along with an introduction from the editors and a foreword by Ursula K. Le Guin. Unfortunately, the essays are not presented in chronological order and there is no index, so it is not easy to trace the evolution of Bookchin’s thinking over time. But the general thrust of his argument comes through pretty clearly.

Power and the State

One way in which Bookchin parts company with “authentic anarchists” is in his attitude toward power. Where Proudhon hoped that power would disappear entirely, Bookchin believes that power is inevitable, like gravity, and the goal is not its elimination, but its taming, by putting it firmly under democratic control.

Bookchin opposes the state, any state, but he argues that we need to distinguish the state and statecraft, on the one hand, from politics, a polity, and government, on the other. The former are inevitable instruments of oppression while the latter include the means and institutions by which a free people organize their lives. Law, which to many anarchists is a dirty word, is not something we should oppose. Indeed, it has been the demand of the oppressed throughout history.



Unfortunately, from Bookchin's writings it is not easy to pin down exactly what the difference is between state and government. Bookchin notes that Marx favored the right of recall of deputies at all levels, minimal bureaucracy, and a militia system based on working class recruits—but none of these institutions "were incompatible with those of a 'bourgeois-democratic' state" (159). (Marx went beyond this in his praise of the Paris Commune in *The Civil Wars in France*, but, says Bookchin, Marx later backpedalled from this position.) Is it states' coerciveness that distinguishes them from government? Apparently not. Consider a question posed by Jeremy Brecher regarding libertarian municipalism (Bookchin's term for his political vision): What prevents a commune from polluting a river that harms other communities downstream (68)? In 1990 Bookchin replied that it was only reasonable to assume that in a society that was guided by communitarian and ecological principles, people wouldn't behave this way (70). But the next year Bookchin wrote that if a community or a minority grouping within a community violated human rights or indulged in environmentally destructive policies, the majority in the confederation of communes "has every right to prevent such malfeasances" (88-89). He doesn't spell out how this preventing is to be done, but it's hard to see this as not being coercive. One can understand why many anarchists were alarmed at the evolution of Bookchin's thinking.

Bookchin even argues that once a commune has joined a confederation it may not leave without the permission of the confederation. Bookchin is rightly concerned about situations where interdependencies have been established and withdrawal by one commune might harm the others. "Imagine if the electrical complex in upstate New York 'autonomously' decided to pull out of a confederation with the Vermont electrical complex because it was piqued by Vermont's behavior."[2] This is the same reason why the right of divorce is not absolute: Before one can leave a marriage, responsibility for children and an equitable division of assets need to be worked out. Nevertheless, even those who believe that the right of secession is not absolute would not want to give absolute veto power to the larger group either—just as we wouldn't want to make divorce contingent on the approval of the spouse. I don't mean to suggest this is an easy issue, but Bookchin seems overly glib

here.

Majority Rule

To many anarchists, majority rule is inherently coercive and thus morally unacceptable. Bookchin quotes Kropotkin's observation that "Majority rule is as defective as any other kind of rule" (10n5). And one can cite modern-day anarchists to the same effect: "When there is no unanimity the vote becomes the tyranny of the many over the reluctant few."[3] The philosophical argument against majority rule strikes me as weak. It doesn't seem to be a violation of my liberty if I voluntarily decide that I want to join a collective where all members agree that they will submit their disagreements (or a specified subset of their disagreements) to majority rule. After all, when I sign a contract to trade something, I am constraining myself (I have to provide the goods in question) but assuming I agreed to the contract freely, my liberty has not been compromised.

The usual anarchist alternative to majority rule is consensus: a process of respecting and accommodating minority views until everyone agrees. Consensus decision-making indeed has many benefits: It builds solidarity, it indicates that each individual is valued, it facilitates the finding of less polarized solutions. But consensus also has some real disadvantages. It may have the effect of stifling, rather than promoting debate. In its effort to avoid the tyranny of the majority, it may allow the tyranny of the minority, indeed the tyranny of a single dissenter. There are various schemes to mitigate (though not eliminate) this problem, for example, limiting the number of times a "blocker" may block, or requiring a certain minimum number of blockers. Of course, some principled anarchists will reject these schemes on the grounds that anything less than unanimity represents oppression.

But consensus decision-making has another serious defect. In general, we will want our movement organizations to prefigure the kinds of institutions we want in a future good society. If we want a future that is non-authoritarian, non-racist, and non-sexist, then we need organizations today that embody these values. But the opposite logic doesn't hold. Our movement organizations today have at least one characteristic that a future society will not have: namely, an incredibly narrow ideological spectrum. When one reads an account of how an alter-globalization organization resolved the question of whether or not to support an existing moderate demonstration using consensus decision-making (they opted to let those who wanted to join it with critical flyers and clothing do so, and those who wanted a separate demonstration to do that), one is struck by how easy this was—compared to deciding in a future good society, for example, whether to build a new abortion clinic (that a substantial minority considers murder) or whether to make vaccinations for a new, killer disease mandatory.[4] Social pressure may well keep anyone in a movement group from blocking what most people want. But the folks who are pushing the "Suppression of Sodomites" referendum in California, to take a grotesque example, are unlikely to go along with a consensus out of shared values.[5]

Participation

So Bookchin's rejection of consensus decision-making and endorsement of majority rule for a future good society seems well judged. But his political vision has other difficulties. Bookchin dismisses representation as inherently oppressive; we need to be active political participants—not just "taxpayers" or "constituents"—in order to reach our full human potential. Representation certainly has serious problems and participation great virtues.[6] But I'm not at all sure his proposed political structure actually solves the participation gap experienced in modern societies. It seems that, for Bookchin, participation need not involve most of the population or even a majority of the population.

Even in completely successful revolutions, says Bookchin, "it was always a minority of the people

who attended meetings of assemblies that made significant decisions about the fate of their society" (52). "A popular democracy," he says, "is not premised on the idea that everyone can, will, or even want to attend popular assemblies" (51). No libertarian, notes Bookchin, should want to make participation compulsory, which means coercing people.

"Even after an uprising is successful, it takes time for a substantial majority of the people to fully participate in the revolutionary process, commonly as crowds in demonstrations, more rarely as participants in revolutionary institutions" (52).

Simply being a constituent or taxpayer doesn't make one an active participant, as Bookchin points out. But does being part of a crowd in a demonstration constitute meaningful participation?

Bookchin goes on:

Politically less-aware individuals may choose not to attend their neighborhood assembly, and they should not be obliged to attend. The assemblies, regardless of their size, will have problems enough without having to deal with indifferent bystanders and passersby. What counts is that the doors of the assemblies remain open for all who wish to attend and participate, for therein lies the true democratic nature of neighborhood assemblies. (53-54)

For Bookchin, Athenian democracy was a model—obviously not for its slavery or gender oppression or xenophobia—but because it showed how the people could rule in face-to-face direct assemblies. There were indeed many fascinating and attractive features of the Athenian political system. But there were some thirty to fifty thousand adult males in Athens. How participatory would a gathering of thirty thousand be? Or even a meeting of six thousand (the Athenian quorum for some decisions)? Could even 1 percent of the attendees speak? How many people would feel comfortable replying to Pericles in an auditorium with one thousand people, let alone a stadium of thirty thousand? Is having a fifth of the eligible citizenry listening to Pericles and a few other orators and then voting really very participatory?

Under libertarian municipalism, those who don't have the interest in participating will have decisions made for them by those who are more interested, even though the two might not share political views. Under oppressive representative democracy, non-activists have political decisions made on their behalf by others (representatives), but at least the views of these others bear some relation to their constituents' views. The challenge for a democratic polity is to be able to maximize participation, and give primary authority to participatory institutions, but not to disempower people when they choose not to participate or when they are happy to have a recallable and transparent representative acting on their behalf.

Controlling the Economy

Bookchin makes a strong case against syndicalism. One problem is its excessive "workerism" (treating only those in workers councils as entitled to a political voice) (10-12). Historically worker-controlled enterprises often became a form of collective capitalism, with competition between firms for raw materials, markets, and profits (19, 90). Bookchin's discussion, however, seems to deny a role for workers councils at all in a good society. Enterprises are to be in the custody of the community, which is "concerned primarily with the quality of its products and their production at the lowest possible cost" (58). But in fact, these are only two of the three production factors that we should be concerned about. We should also care about how the way goods are produced affects the well-being of the producers, and this can only be known if there are workers councils reflecting the views of workers as workers.

Bookchin believes that "if a community can produce the things it needs, it should probably do so" (72). This formulation suggests that Bookchin doesn't care about opportunity costs (we *can* produce pineapples in New Jersey—in greenhouses—but doing so would use resources that we could better employ elsewhere). He also seems suspicious of exchanges between communities as representing the beginnings of a market system (72), but doesn't address the basis on which non-self-sufficient communities will get goods from elsewhere. Leftists critical of both central planning and the market have proposed alternatives, some worked out in great detail, like Albert and Hahnel's participatory planning,[7] but Bookchin leaves his alternative wholly undeveloped.

A Commune of Communes

Bookchin compellingly and strongly rejects the glamorization of poverty, denial, and scarcity prevalent in some segments of the left. He acknowledges that communities cannot produce all they need and that "notions of decentralization that emphasize localist isolation and a degree of self-sufficiency may lead to cultural parochialism and chauvinism" (71). To get beyond extreme decentralization, he calls for a commune of communes—a confederation.

Bookchin repeatedly states that the confederation is to consist of delegates from the local communes who are recallable and mandated (that is, given strictly binding, prior instructions). The delegates are only to engage in administration, not policymaking; policymaking is to be the exclusive responsibility of the local communes. But at one point Bookchin says that the confederal councils would have as their "sole function" to "adjudicate differences and undertake strictly administrative tasks" (40). But what does "adjudicate differences" mean? Local community X wants to do something that will negatively impact community Y. How could adjudicating this disagreement be considered an administrative task? And what would it mean for a delegate from community Z—or even communities X or Y—to be mandated in this situation? How could one have instructions before hearing the nature of the disagreement?

Mandated delegates are problematic more generally. If a local commune sends a delegate who is required to vote a certain way in the confederal council, then there is no need for the confederal council to meet at all. No delegate will be swayed by the arguments of another (they're not allowed to be); no delegates can work out a compromise on the basis of deliberation and cooperation (they are bound to their position). So the council seems to serve no function other than tallying votes, which means votes could just be called in to a clerk or a computer. But in any case, there's nothing to vote on because the confederation is responsible just for administrative tasks. This sounds rather like the nominal role of executives in the American political system (legislators make the laws and executives carry them out)—though of course we know that *in practice* administrative agencies play a tremendous policymaking role.

Elsewhere, though not in this book, Bookchin has indicated that there are not just two layers of councils (the face-to-face assemblies and the confederation), but essentially confederations of confederations.[8] I think this makes good sense, and it would allow Bookchin to avoid the problem of the excessive size of the face-to-face assemblies. But with his insistence on mandates, the situation becomes confused. At each level there is vote tallying but no deliberation. People are in a cooperative society, but actual cooperation—that is, modifying one's positions to take account of the positions of others—is extremely difficult.

What is needed instead of mandates is upper-level councils that can deliberate, but whose decisions can be ratified from below when necessary, whose members are subject to recall, and whose deliberations are all transparent.

Getting From Here to There

Bookchin properly insists that we need more than "a politics of mere protest"; we need "programmatic content" and "a proposed alternative" (171). His argument here is something that Occupy activists might have paid more attention to.

But Bookchin's strategy for getting to his proposed alternative raises many questions. He is strongly opposed to Greens and other leftists participating in state or national elections. Doing so, he claims, legitimizes the state. He is also very skeptical of efforts to create alternative workplaces, coops, and the like as merely reinforcing capitalist relations. On the other hand, he favors "communalists" running for local office, from which they can support the establishment of local popular assemblies. He assails his critics for not seeing the difference between running for governor (which the U.S. Greens have "nightmarishly" proposed (78)) and running for mayor ("the powers of a mayor are far more controlled and under closer public purview than those of" state office holders (80)). This is generally true, but, even setting aside the megacities like New York and Los Angeles, more than two dozen U.S. cities have populations larger than that of Wyoming. In any event, municipal officials are not elected at face-to-face meetings; they are representatives elected by voters at the polls.

To be sure, local elections are generally smaller scale, and because this increases the likelihood of a local, left plurality, there will be more opportunities for the left to succeed in local elections than in state or national ones. But it's hard to see the difference *in principle* between participating in the former compared to the latter. If one takes the view that only votes by participatory bodies are legitimate, then mayoral contests ought to be just as unacceptable as state-wide elections. If running in local elections is permissible because it can lead to reforms that will further a participatory agenda or because of its educational value, it would seem that the same should hold for state or national elections.

In the current reactionary times, theorizing about possible futures or wondering how we might get there might seem hopelessly beside the point. But in fact Bookchin's ideas have had considerable influence in Kurdistan, and, according to some reports, are actually being incorporated there to some degree.[9]

More generally, the conversation about what we consider a good society is important for inspiring and informing the political work of libertarian socialists. Even where I think Murray Bookchin has got it wrong, there is no doubt that he has contributed to our common project.

Notes

1. See pp. 14n7, 24n17, 160-62. For details of his transition, see the essay by his collaborator and companion, Janet Biehl, "Bookchin Breaks with Anarchism," *Communalism*, 2007, http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/janet-biehl-bookchin-breaks-with-anarchism. The problem with the term "communalism" is noted by Damian White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 185.

2. Bookchin, "Thoughts on Libertarian Municipalism," *Left Green Perspectives* (Number 41, January 2000), available at http://www.social-ecology.org/1999/08/thoughts-on-libertarian-municipalism/. Bookchin briefly mentions the (non-)right of secession in the current volume on p. 15n8.

3. E.g., Judith Malina, "Anarchists and the Pro-Hierarchical Left," *Anarchos,* June 1972, cited in Biehl, 12.

4. Marianne Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many: How the Alterglobalization Movement is Changing*

the Face of Democracy (New York: Pluto, 2009), 147-51.

5. Adam Nagourney, "Gays Targeted in a California Initiative," *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/25/us/california-initiative-would-kill-gay-people.html.

6. I have made this argument here: "Parpolity: Political Vision for a Good Society," Nov. 2005, available at https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/parpolity-political-vision-for-a-good-society-by-stephen1-shalom-1/.

7. See Michael Albert, *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (Verso: 2004), available online at https://zcomm.org/life-after-capitalism/; Robin Hahnel, *Of the People, By the People: The case for a participatory economy* (Soapbox Press, 2012, distributed by AK Press). For an extensive debate between Albert and supporters of libertarian municipalism, see https://zcomm.org/debates-parecon-social-ecology/.

8. "The Left: Past, Present, and Future," Interview by Doug Morris [1996?] in Murray Bookchin, *Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays, 1993-1998* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1999), 313.

9. See, for example, Janet Biehl, "Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy," New Compass, Feb. 16, 2012, http://new-compass.net/articles/bookchin-%C3%B6calan-and-dialectics-democracy; TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan: The Council Movement, Gender Liberation, and Ecology* (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2013); Alexander Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution: Institutionalizing Libertarian Socialism in Kurdistan," *New Politics online*, Nov. 2, 2014, http://newpol.org/content/no-state-solution-institutionalizing-libertarian-socialism-kurdistan.